A Review on Lynn Freed's The Bungalow Novel

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Abstract— Ruth Frank, the narrator of Freed's critically acclaimed Home Ground, has grown up in this appealing novel. She married and settled in America, she returns to South Africa after her father suffers a heart attack. She is unhappy with her husband Clive (he's also South African and Jewish, now a biomedical researcher with no desire ever to return home). Ruth has found her parents older, seedier, more marginal than ever—but prone to the same passionate hatreds and desires that their theatrical life has encouraged over the years. She visits her sister and wealthy brother-in-law and sees them terribly uneasy with the decaying privilege they inhabit in a country fast becoming scary, unsafe, anarchic. There, she resumes her youthful romance with Hugh Stillington, a reform-minded landowner from a prosperous family of sugar barons. Ruth is an outsider belonging neither in America nor in the country of her birth. Only in Hugh's bungalow does she experience the ``keen sense of being in the right place." But when Hugh is murdered, leaving her pregnant, Ruth is forced to confront her sense of displacement. Ruth is a compelling heroine whose experiences shed light on white South Africa and its assumptions about race, class and belonging. And while the political turmoil of that country occasionally surfaces in a passing reference to Sharpeville or when an Indian writer is imprisoned for his views, the real story--like that of the biblical Ruth--is one of personal alienation and belonging.

Keywords: Ruth Frank, Clive, Hugh Stillington, Catherine, Edwina, Krishnah.

I. INTRODUCTION

Freed here continues the story of Ruth Frank (narrator of the novel), begun in the excellent Home Ground (1986): Ruth's South African Jewish childhood now behind her, she has married lovelessly and returned from New York on a solo visit to see her

parents after her father suffers a heart attack. It was 1975 [1]. For eleven years I (Ruth Frank) had been coming and going like so many others who had left to live overseas. Peered out of the plane window at the sun roaring up over the African plains, and felt my heart heave with joy. Filled my weeks at home with dinners and lunches and teas and shopping. And then wept when it was time to leave again. I loved my parents the way some mothers love their children-without ambition, and full of lies. With other people I was different. Fretful, critical, proud. If there were a meaning to these differences, I hadn't yet tried to find it. All I knew was that only by leaving had I been able to give them the happiness of my coming back [2].

This time, however, things were different. We sat in the shade of the verandah, with lunch laid out on the table as usual-cold meats, fried fish, a few salads, and some puddings, all under small net umbrellas to keep off the flies. It is a commonplace among expatriates that one might miss the death of a parent-the phone lines down, a plane immobilised on a runway, a connection missed, and then the distance to cover. Still, even though my father hadn't died-hadn't, apparently, even had a heart attack, just a fright-still I accepted the blame for my absence from my mother. I even welcomed the novelty of it. "Is he talking to you today?" I asked. Instantly, her eyes watered over. She shook her head vigorously, reaching into her bag for a hanky and then clearing her nose with two fierce blows. The performance had always made my father wince. Me too.

A few years before, wondering about my own life, I'd asked my father whether he'd ever regretted marrying. This question, however, I'd blurted outm after one of their fights. And he'd answered instantly. "After Catherine was born," he'd said, lacing up a shoe and then stamping down that foot. "There was never any peace after that."

"There was always madness in his family," my mother went on. "Just think of Josephine, or old Uncle Tertius. He wasn't quite right either, you know, although they went to the ends of the earth to deny it." We faced each other, t he forty-odd years and one man between us like an intrigue of history. Age and smoking had dulled the whites and blacks of her eyes. A bright wing of rouge radiated along each high cheekbone, right into the roots of her hair. Pinkish make-up ran in the furrows of her brow and in the loops of her cheeks, lipstick in the creases around her mouth. In her vexation or her grief, she'd smudged away the pencilled half of one eyebrow, leaving tufts of grey [3].

Once she had been magnificent. A dark temptress who had turned a man's life. She had paused at the top of the stairs on a Saturday evening, dressed up for the Majestic, with her head held high, and its bundle of black hair gleaming. I remembered my father waiting below, scanning the front page of the evening paper. And me-unnoticed by either-wishing he would turn, just this once, to watch her descend. The maisonette my parents rented was part of a huge old house that had been divided up, garden too, by the Maynard-Smythes, who lived on the other side. High on the ridge, with stone walls, leaded windows, large rooms and

elegant fittings, the place was so much like our old house that my parents seemed to consider it their own. Old Maynard-Smythe had a head on his shoulders, my mother liked to say. He hadn't sold out for a song, like my father, after Sharpeville.

I (Ruth Frank) watched her sleeping off a large lunch and two martinis. Her head had flopped over the back of the chair, her mouth hanging open. In the shadow of the verandah, with her hair shifted skew off her face and her cheeks sucked in between her jaws, she looked dead. "Ma!" I whispered. A snore rattled out into the afternoon. She jerked awake, and stared. "What's the matter?" she drawled. "Nothing. It's four o'clock. I ordered tea." She (her Ma) sighed and shook her head and coughed and reached for her cigarettes. "After thirty," she announced, "it's not so easy to fall pregnant." "In America," I said, "it's quite normal to wait." "Don't give me that normal!" she snapped, lighting a cigarette and then sending out smoke to mix with the leafy smells of a garden going to pot. "You've always used one country to get away with murder in the other."

The words struck me with a surprising blow. How had I, in all my years of coming to conclusions, failed to see the matter quite so bluntly? And how had she, in whom thought and utterance occurred so simultaneously, managed to keep this observation to herself? I accepted my tea and considered the dozens of ways I had tried to reassure her that I wanted no such thing. That I had settled for nothing yet, not even a country. But sitting there with her, listening to her familiar phrases of misgiving, I suddenly felt my presence there as I had so often felt it overseas. Illegitimate. A whim,a luxury.

"There's more to it," she (Ma) said. "Ma, I've told you. There's nothing more to it." (But my mother felt entitled by her old age, and by her reputation for unrelenting frankness, to believe whatever she chose to believe, And to ask the same question as often as she wished. If an answer didn't suit, she simply asked again.

I looked at my watch. "I'm going to have a bath," I said. "Edwina said they haven't got hot water, or electricity, or a phone on the farm." All day, lie upon lie had been fluttering up through my throat and out into the air. They seemed to give me hope. "If there's no one there to follow me home, I'll stay over". "Believe me," she said, twin streams of smoke spewing from her nostrils, "whatever a man says, he wants to see his name carried on. Even your father. I've always felt, you know, that his big regret

was not having had a son." [4].

II. AT CARTERS' PARTY

Driving off to the party in my father's old Rover, I suddenly felt free and full of hope. I plunged a cassette into the tape deck and rolled down the window. "Very superstitious" roared out into the dusk, against the wishes of the government. "Writing's on the wall," I shouted at the top of my voice as I sailed down slope after slope. I was going into the company of strangers. No hairdos, no drivers, no manicures. "When you believe in things that you don't understand, then you suffer,'" I wailed. I quietened down when I came upon the chaos at Berea junction. I'd completely forgotten my sister Catherine's warning always to take the long way across the ridge. And I'd forgotten this mad- ness of workers set free for a long weekend-thousands of them swarming to the depot and station [5].

A township bus edged into my fane, and I rolled up the window to close out the fumes. I leaned across the seat and rolled the other one up too. As I sat up again, something just out of focus and separated from the general confusion outside, made me look up. A crowd of young black faces were laughing down at me. Some banged at the glass of the fixed bus window. A few fists stabbed the air in the black freedom salute. I had never known how to turn away from the hostility of a crowd. Never as a girl at school. Never even as an adult. To open my windows again would prove nothing. Nothing I could do would alter the assurance these people had that their presence, squashed into a bus, had terrified a white woman into rolling up her windows.

By the time I reached the shabby Victorian house of Bruce Carter, chairman of the English Department, night had come on suddenly, and, with it, the wind from the seal Flying ants, brought out by the late-afternoon rain, clouded around the street lamps. I sat for a while in the dark, listening to the ticking of the engine as it cooled, hoping that Edwina had got to the party before me. I hadn't seen Edwina since I'd left for America eight years before. Somehow, with that departure, I'd chosen a life that didn't include her, not even on my visits home. But this time I wanted her back. I wanted to meet different people, real people. The sort of people I thought Edwina would know. Mostly the 'varsity set, I'm afraid," she'd said. "But Hugh will be there-ever see him anymore? And Krishnah Chowdree, just out of detention, thanks to Hugh. Krishnah's something of a local hero. Written a book, you know. Banned here, but published overseas."

A Jewish gypsy who had come, by some dark trick, on an invitation. The door pulled wide, and I was staring all at once into the beady lapis of Hugh's eyes. "Aha!" he said. He didn't move to let me in, but stood there, smiling with an edge of teeth, his bad hand plunged, as usual, into the pocket of his slacks. Facing him like that again-his sunburnt face and neck and arms, his starched white shirt, his thatch of tawny hair gone grey and lifting, just the top layer of it, in the wind-I felt, suddenly, as if I'd never been away. "Edwina just phoned to say she couldn't come," he said, touching my elbow lightly. "Asked me to look out for you."

Behind him people moved about in candlelight. Candles, gluedonto saucers, flared and trembled in the wind. "Shut the bloody door!" someone shouted. People turned here and there to observe me. A roar of men came from the far verandah. They stood out there in short shorts and sandals, drinking beer straight out of bottles. Ready for flight in a change of season."Here," said Hugh,

handing me a plastic tumbler of yellow wine. He led to one of the cane-backed chairs and squatted next to me. "Eight years, sit?" he said, fingering a packet of cigarettes out of f his shirtt pocket.

"I often thought of phoning you," I said. Actually, I'd heard on my first visit home that he'd taken up with a Belgian anthropologist, woman of natural beauty, immense sophistication, and extreme intelligence. And, after that, I'd given up thinking of him at all. "Still married?" he asked, sending a smoke ring out into the air. "Barely. And you?" He laughed silently. "I am still as you found me. But you seem- what shall I say?" He ran the back of his crooked finger along the arch of my foot and looked up into my face. "How are you placed for tonight?" I nodded. I'd taken it out, just to hold it, like a talisman, between the palms of my hands. Or I'd hinged open its shell and lifted it out, sniffed the latex, held it up to the light, a perfect circle. "Seem what?" I asked. "What do I seem?" He settled onto the floor, resting his elbow on his knee, his chin in his hand. "Sobered," he said.

Cynthia Carter holding out a hand to pull me up. "I want you to meet the crowd." "Ruth, this is Bunny, John Conradie's new wife. You know John, don't you? The history prof? No? Well, anyway, here's Bunny." Cynthia gave up and turned away to look around the room. "Have you met our Krishnah?" she asked. "He's the guest of ho- nour. I pretended to look around too. But I wished with all my heart. I hadn't come. "He's published a book," Bunny said. "Overseas. Isn't that super?" Super," I agreed.

"You could always write a book about us," said Bunny. "It's all the rage these days." That first summer in New York City, I found that my clothes were all wrong. The flimsy shorts and strappy sundresses that had served quite well at home couldn't be worn there without subjecting me to the wild antics and suggestions of men. Sometimes, Clive brought home mangoes, and, once, a bag of lichees from the Chinese store. These gifts I accepted gratefully. But the mangoes had been picked too soon. They were sour and green. The lichees were old and watery. I threw them down the chute. And broke down completely when my sheets were missing one night from the dryer. It wasn't as if I didn't understand theft. I had grown up with it. But when I thought of my mother choosing them for colour and thread count, with wool blankets to match, the crime took on a significance beyond what I could explain to Clive.

There were no ceremonies to mark things off. I had lunch standing in front of the refrigerator, tea in a mug at any time of the day. In our two rooms, with the traffic roaring fourteen stories down, and the air conditioner buzzing, I found myself warping hour into day, day into week, waiting for Clive to come home. And what of Clive? From the start, an insufficiency of desire had passed between us like a curse. I had suffered it first-accepted it, hidden it away as Clive rose and fell above me. But then, as soon as we were married, it settled onto him. Night after night he gave up, defeated. "It's the Jewish thing," he said. "The wife-mother thing." And I, considering his mother, who was vulgar and fat and ugly and shrill, found myself worrying not only about myself, but about all the other women-not wives, or mothers, or Jewish-who could take my place. What we had in our one room, and then in our two rooms, and then in our four rooms with a view of the river, and bicycles in the basement, and dinner parties on a Saturday night, was a marriage. The real world, to which I had thought I had come, was quite absent. Or, if there in some unexpected form, empty of comfort. Lonely beyond any loneliness I had ever known.

"In the States," I offered quickly, "they solve things with euphemisms. You must have heard of 'affirmative action'? "You should hear our euphemisms!" a grey-haired woman insisted. "Did you ever hear of 'Plurals'?" "Oh yes!" I laughed. "I heard that long ago!" Fox-face fixed me with a glare. People shuffled and coughed. I understood too late that there were things they didn't want me to know. They wanted no worldly wisdom from me. What they needed was an outside audience A foreign witness to a unique failure) If I refused the role, they'd shun me. They were turning away right now, discussing matters of administration, leaving me to Bruce Carter. "Hello, Ruth," he said. "Let me introduce you to Krishnah Krish"-he tapped the Indian on the arm-"this is Ruth Frank, She lives in America."Krishnah turned and the crowd turned with him."I'm very glad to meet you," I said. "I've heard so much about you." "Of course you have," he replied. "Everybody has heard about me. I'm quite notorious, you see." He had a high-pitched singsong voice that hit me in the bone.

I felt the heat rise from my chest to my neck, from neck to cheeks to ears. I glanced around for Hugh. I thought I heard him, but he wasn't there. "Well, not quite notorious," I said. "More like peculiar, I suppose." "Oh, 'peculiar' is it?" Krishnah chanted. "And what is it about you that is 'peculiar,' may I ask?" "Coming back here, I suppose. My American friends seem to think I'm quite mad." I tried a laugh. He frowned at me in silence, as if trying to understand. "Leaving safety, perhaps " I suggested. "Safety?" he echoed quickly. "Please be so good as to tell me if I am to understand that we are facing an act of heroism on your part in returning to this country?" Someone whispered in the crowd. There was a snort. A vise closed around my chest, almost stopping my breathing. "Heroism isn't in it," I said softly. People looked from him to me and me to him. I watched him closely, ready for a pounce. But he simply bowed his head and closed his eyes. He held us for some seconds in the silence. "Forgive me," he said at last. "I am really out of touch, you see. When you are as cut off as I have been, you learn to repeat and repeat things so that you don't go mad. It's a habit I have now. Sometimes I forget that there is a very peaceful world going on out there, a very safe place."

I saw the trap, but seeing didn't stop me, like the fat girl in school, from trying to make friends with the bully. "In fact," I assured him, "America is anything but safe, as you probably know.

I was simply trying to give you the truth. Surely you would prefer that?" He jerked upright, eyes wide. "Sssooo!" he hissed. "You are giving me the gift of truth, is it?" He paused. I didn't answer. "But surely, Krish," Bruce said, "you must acknowledge the validity of non-position?. Especially for an Outsider? Krishnah ignored him, jerking his head this way, that way, like a bird.

The audience looked at me. Bunny cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered something to Cynthia. "Rubbish!" I lied. "No one I know reads those books." "What do they read, then? Their glorious Constitution? All those white-haired, white male landowners writing down one truth after another? My word!" he shouted at the crowd. "Perhaps those Americans would find my own book altogether too hot to handle? Perhaps they think I should go back where I came from, like their own black people? Or take a job in the Botanic Gardens like my founding fathers? What do you think?" The group laughed. People moved off. Someone brought Krishnah a glass of Oros and water and some biscuits on a plate. It was a victory parade, and he the local favourite. As the crowd moved off, Hugh kept his hand on my shoulder. "Ready?" he asked. "You leave first," I said. "I'll follow in ten minutes."

I drove fast through the cane, switched on the radio, switched it off again. Perhaps Hugh's bungalow would restore me. Carry me beyond the ordinary claims of my own small history. Going to the Carters' party had been a mistake. It had, somehow, claimed me back after all these years, and in all the old ways. And yet, claimed, I'd felt abandoned. As I swung hard onto the coastal road, a dark head flashed across the beam of my headlight. I leapt onto the brake. The bottle of wine I'd forgotten shattered against the dashboard. The car bucked and skidded and then cut out with a shudder. "Shit!" I whispered, rolling down the window. "Are you there?" I called into the dark. "Are you O.K.?" No sound came back. The car smelled sour with wine and dust. I climbed out. I could hear the roar of the surf, nothing else. Holding on to the car with one hand, I crept slowly towards the front wheels. The beams shone straight out, above the dark surface of the road, lighting up, now, in the distance, the white- painted

tree trunks of the hotel driveway. "Oh, thank God!" I whispered at the sight [6].

After a while I heard the bush rustling. I heard an African singing or shouting somewhere in the distance, a car hooting. I was almost sure there had been no thud. I hadn't heard it, hadn't felt it as I'd felt the dog I'd hit on the Merritt Parkway. That had stayed with me for months-the dead sound, the dead feel of it. "Is anyone hurt?" I asked into the darkness. "Please answer me." Nothing came back. "Please," I said more loudly, making my way back to the car door, "if you need help, don't be afraid."By the time I arrived at Hugh's bungalow, I was almost sure I hadn't hit anyone. Still, the solitary scene, its violence, victim or no victim, made my hand shake as I reached up for the knocker.

III. AT HUGH STILLINGTON BUNGALOW

The first time Hugh Stillington had brought me out to the bungalow, I hadn't been ready for his world. I'd sat on the verandah thinking of things to say as he'd dismissed the servants in a perfect Zulu and then a poured me a sherry from an old cut-glass decanter. He had found me in 1967, flushed- with play, at ment party. Three years at Edwina's engage- at Oxford had not only sharpened my wit and tongue, but had changed the I looked. I'd learned a new style way of dress there quite different from the one I'd suffered under my mother's co-ordinating eye and taste for embellishment. I'd grown my hair too, tied it back into a knot to balance the length of my nose; cut down fibres. on make-up, thrown out my costume jewelry and synthetic

It was one thing, however, to flirt with Hugh at Edwina's in the company of her friends. Quite another to sit on the verandah of his bungalow, watching bats swoop and squeak across the dark of the sky, wondering whether was the sort of man who would be touched by my virginity. I knew that the women in his set had no such burdens, especially at the age of twenty-one. And that virginity was nothing to be proud of. Still, I was proud. And he was over forty. He had the massive blueness and blondness of another breed. And he had a crippled hand. I watched him wrap its three fingers around the stem of a sherry glass, wishing I had something more to offer him. "Have you ever been to America?" I asked. "Ah yes. Twice."

"When do you leave?" he asked. "March." He settled back into a chair, holding his glass between his hands. "Why?" "Actually," I said, "it's rather mad. I'm going to do post-graduate work in New York. I have a scholarship. There's someone there-" "Ah!" I laughed. "I hardly know him, actually. It's really quite mad when you come to think of it." I heard myself repeating words, and my voice and accent taking on the swoop and wheeze of the women I thought he must be used to. My mother had told me that the Stillington fortune had dwindled to nothing, and that it served them right. Old Nigel Stillington virtually ran the Royal Country Club, she said, and still wasn't lifting a finger, despite his so-called liberal views, to open up the membership to the better sort of Jew like my father. "Actually,' 'actually-"Hugh sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Actually, Miss Frank, I would guess that your journey isn't nearly mad enough." "Why?"

"Why? Because, you choose to be here, with me. Come," he said. standing up. "I want to take you inside." I took his hand, taking the blame in silence. But I hated the idea of having chosen to be there with him. It took away the romance of being given no choice at all. And exposed my choice of America for what it was. Cheap.

Everyone else had accepted without question that I was going to America to get some more degrees, a clever girl like me. I had almost come to believe it myself. The fact that my parents couldn't afford an overseas education for me, that I would have use

up my scholar- ship money for the plane ticket alone was still an unspoken secret among us. The whole plan seemed to fit well with Clive's green card, with the way he kept apart from other Jewish men ready to take a wife. Just as I stood apart from the sort of Jewish women who majored ied in psych and socio at the local university and announced their engagements just before graduation. The style I had acquired at twenty-one-which consisted of little more than a skittish intolerance for group enthusiasms-seemed consistent with wanting Clive Brasch for a husband. I loved Clive already. Loved him for his slight stoop and slim hips and skewed, off-centre smile. Loved him as I lay naked in the dark with Hugh Stillington a month before departure. It was a matter of pride. Something Hugh would never have understood.

"Lose your way?" Hugh asked, opening the door. I shook my head. If I told him about the incident on the road, he'd rush out into the night like a warrior. The police would be called in. The diaphragm jelly would lose its potency. I followed him into the lounge. It was lit only by a pale moon off the sea, but still I could make out the hulk of the couch, the chairs opposite, the round brass tray on the coffee table, two glasses on it. In the gloom, the place seemed bigger, the walls and ceiling lost in darkness. And Hugh older. His eyes had vanished in their sockets, deep shadows cut across his cheeks.

"I'm going to brain that bloody Krishnah tomorrow," he said, pouring the Cognac. "Shall I brain him for you?" I stood in the dark, trying to think up a clever answer. But, something in the kindness of the question itself, or in the playful cadence of his voice, had closed my throat with tears. I turned away. "Good God!" he said, coming over. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me. "He can be like a dog at meat, that little bugger," he said. "When he's faced with someone like you, he sees red. I'll certainly have a word with him tomorrow.

I shook my head, and blew my nose, and then announced, "I may have run into someone on the coastal road." "What?" "I'm almost sure I did. I stopped the car, and looked around and called, but there was no one there." "Hmm." He stalked to the French doors, stood there, his hands clasped behind him. A pair of binoculars hung from a hook near the door. Their lenses caught the moonlight. "Don't stop next time," he said, coming back. He picked up my glass and handed it to me. "Here, I think you should have this." Outside, the wind was picking up. "There'll be a storm tomorrow," he said. He came to stand before me. "God," he murmured, "God, what a gorgeous woman you've become!" I laughed, I shivered, if I were in need of reasons to be taking a lover, I could easily find them in phrases like this. But is wasn't just his praise I wanted, the please and thank-you of a gift. Like any conqueror, I wanted more, much more.

The next morning, I walked out onto the verandah to watch the sun rise over the sea. It was pale, diffused by a storm building up on the horizon. The beach itself looked as desolate as ever. Because of the curve and height of the cliff, it was mostly in shadow, even in the morning. Without shark nets, there had never been a question of swimming. "Some cup of tea, madam?"

I drew Hugh's toweling gown more tightly around me. "I'm coming in," I said. "It's cold." But inside was also cold. The num-num hedge, grown wild with neglect, brushed back and forth against the bed- room wall. The boy had run off for no reason, the maid complained, as she brought in the tray. And monkeys were stealing the bananas again. What could she do? I smiled, watching the dark tea are beautifully from the spout into the cup. Nothing had changed out here. With its bottle-green wicker and worn rush matting, its flowered linen slipcovers and teak and brass and bits of dinner and silver services that had survived a succession of unsupervised servants, Hugh's bungalow still seemed as it had seemed before-beyond the reach of normal life and rules.

The place had been built before the turn of the century by Hugh's great-grandfather, the provincial administrator, for his Indian mistress-cut deep into the bush far north of town before there was a bridge or a proper road to reach it by. Rain began to drum down on the corrugated iron roof. Wind drove it across the verandah, green as glass. I took my tea to the window to wait for it to stop. And, when it did, went out again. onto the steaming verandah to watch two ships moving through the light. Even as I stood there wanting to go home, thinking up more lies to loosen myself from the tight collar of my parents' concern-even as I did-I knew I'd had no moment like this anywhere before. Not ever this keen sense of being in the right place.

IV. CONCLUSION

Lynn Freed explores the story of Ruth Frank who is the narrator of this novel. Ruth Frank is a South African Jewish childhood. She married and settled in America, she returns to South Africa after her father suffers a heart attack. She is unhappy with her husband Clive. Ruth has found her parents older, seedier, more marginal than ever—but prone to the same passionate hatreds and desires that their theatrical life has encouraged over the years. There, she resumes her youthful romance with Hugh Stillington, a reform-minded landowner from a prosperous family of sugar barons. Only in Hugh's bungalow does she experience the ``keen sense of being in the right place." But when Hugh is murdered, leaving her pregnant, Ruth is forced to confront her sense of displacement. As sharp as the portraiture is (Freed can write a crowd or party scene as well as anyone today), Ruth's chronicle of plight, decision, and process of reconsideration moves along at a slower, more deliberate pace than the quick-tempo prose does, and, ultimately, the effect is not a happy one. Still, Freed fans may not care especially, satisfied enough with the very humane, high-grade novelizing that's here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If desired, a section of acknowledgement can be included following the conclusion.

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